

University of Colorado, Boulder CU Scholar

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Honors Program

Fall 2014

Plumeria

Anna Zumbahlen

Anna.Zumbahlen@Colorado.EDU

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

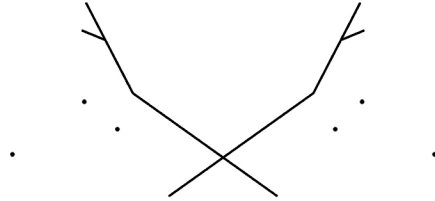
Zumbahlen, Anna, "Plumeria" (2014). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 756.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.



plumeria

POEMS BY ANNA ZUMBAHLEN



plumeria

Anna Zumbahlen
Departmental Honors in English
University of Colorado – Boulder
6 November 2014

Thesis Advisor
Noah Eli Gordon, English Department

Defense Committee
Noah Eli Gordon, English Department
Marcia Douglas, English Department
Lucas Carmichael, Religious Studies Department

I have not had an easy time speaking articulately about my intentions. The thread binding my poetry together, although present, has felt unnamable. There is something unflattering about the word ‘confessional’ and the assumption that the lyric I is autobiographical, but I also feel beholden to my poetry as a representation of some aspect of myself. Whether or not I claim the poem’s *I* as a true iteration of myself, I have to admit that I am responsible for stringing these words together. What felt painful was the realization that language may be arbitrary, as though nothing defined by language alone could possibly be true. Language, I discovered, mediates, and writing deliberate poetry is a process closer to methodical than intentional. By this, I mean I found myself going through the same process with each poem, which felt unfamiliar at first, because before this project I had been accustomed to writing poetry when I felt I had something specific to say. In the experience of learning how to write poetry for the sake of craft, this experiment in chance became routine. I sourced language from various texts or spoken language (which I had collected in my notebook over the course of a few days), and I built up a block of text without any thought to what it might represent. Then I shaped it until something caught. I began to understand that after all that what matters is the effect. “That’s part of the beauty of books,” explains Maggie Nelson, author of *Bluets*, in an interview with Bookslut. “They shimmer up out of all the mess and uncertainty and make their way in the world without your emotions attached to them (which makes space for others to have their own emotions about them)” (Bookslut). This was, for me, novel, and I had to release my assumption that writing poetry is a private practice. Poetry is a craft and not intimacy for the sake of intimacy. I wanted to open my language to the possibility of the reader’s private life. In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Wallace Stevens names this posturing of language and intimacy: “However fragrant, however dear./ That’s it: the more than rational distortion,/ The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.”

So, poetry becomes a fiction, inhabitable by any reader. In *Forces of Imagination*, Barbara Guest writes, “The poet is not there only to share a poetic communication, but to stimulate an imaginative speculation on the nature of reality” (Guest 26). That reality is restless, “a variable...open-ended in form and matter” (Guest 27). Reality is the kind of term that could point to any number of things and maybe, as a consequence, sometimes to nothing tangible. As a result, I can feel myself beginning to understand the draw toward

experimentation with formal poetry and Oulipian constraints. I did not necessarily use these techniques as a method of approaching this project, but my attitude toward them is softening into a preliminary understanding of the ways in which exercises in form could encourage poetry to grow in a direction that it might have otherwise avoided. I have felt myself preoccupied by the placement of words when perhaps I ought to think more closely about content, and this is where I think formal constraints might foster growth. Without the worry of the construction of form, perhaps the content could do something new. Of course, form is not static, and syntax is elastic, so there is a point at which formal rules could too become arbitrary.

The things I read are the primary sources of language appropriated into my work. This is, of course, a roundabout way of claiming everything, all text, as an influence, which it can't help but be. "Poetry transforms the real world into fiction," a translation of a certain experience into a written world as close to or far from the everyday as need be (Guest 26). A poem reflects a state of mind and arises out of the poet's subconscious and whatever content stews there. In the case of this project, my poetry is most readily indicative of whatever I had read or whomever I had heard speak during any given week. This collection reflects a mindset shaped by the poetry collections I have read this semester in addition to the lectures of a religious studies course concerned with Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and one focused on interpretations of the Judeo-Christian God. These poems are experimentations in syntax and vocabulary, though I tried to abstain from the usage of recognizably religious images. This decision was somewhat arbitrary. Overt navigation of religious texts and ideals feels awkward in my craft right now, which I think is likely a result of my fluid relationship with spiritual texts. There is a line to be drawn somewhere in here between the academic and the intimate, and this is where I feel poetry does its best, most quiet work.

This is not to say that I don't consider my poetry to be at all spiritual. Barbara Guest says, "The poem needs to have a spiritual or metaphysical life if it is going to engage itself with reality" (Guest 28). Poetry is the site where we grapple with the limitations of language, and successful poetry transcends those limitations in order to access reality (or, at least, a version of reality). Poetry breaks words by conveying what cannot be expressed with language. My Buddhist philosophy professor, Jules Levinson, made the remark that some Tibetan Buddhist texts are "utterly incomprehensible except that they are translated directly." In other

words, syntax, context, and tone can salvage meaning. Words themselves are subject to arbitration, but poetry makes use of all of these elements.

What feels significant to me about this project is that the majority of the poems (with the exception of about three, which I included because they felt relevant to the body of work as a whole) were written over the course of the last three months. I suppose I could say that the constraint of this project has been the November deadline, my first real poetry deadline, an active motivator. Unexpectedly, the anxiety associated with the deadline did not stifle my writing process – only the process of writing this statement. For me, it is significant that these poems have been the result of approximately the same mindset – at the very least, the product of the same, fairly close time period. That being said, I feel like the narrative with which I am working occupies a timeframe beyond August, September, and October. I have arranged this collection according to a sort of fictitious chronology, because the progression of seasons felt like the most natural structure for the project as a whole. If the moments of these poems all belong to the same year, then they are in order according to the seasons into which they would fit.

Books that have in some way contributed to this project:

Veil: New and Selected Poems by Rae Armantrout (Wesleyan, 2001)

A lesson in how to create a scene in under twelve words.

The To Sound by Eric Baus (Verse Press, 2004)

How to repeat images to encourage the drawing of conclusions.

Geography III by Elizabeth Bishop (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976)

How to have a sense of scale.

For Another Writing Back by Elaine Bleakney (Sidebrow Books, 2014)

How to bend syntax in favor of decay in all its manifestations.

A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon by CAConrad (Wave Books, 2012)

A lesson in how to write embodied and fearless.

Alphabet by Inger Christensen (New Directions Books, 2000)

How to be aware of the effects of translation.

Point and Line by Thalia Field (New Directions Books, 2000)

How to sustain a narrative without over-explanation.

Necessary Stranger by Graham Foust (Flood Editions, 2007)

How to carry a phrase until its image surfaces.

The Body, The Rooms by Andy Frazee (Subito Press, 2011)

How to write with a specific geography.

Fabric: Preludes to the Last American Book by Richard Froude (Horse Less Press, 2011)

An example of voice-led narrative, with an emphasis on the poetry of historical facts.

Collected Poems of Barbara Guest (Wesleyan, 2008)

A manifold Eden – in image, voice, and form.

Sir by HR Hegnauer (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, 2013)

How to let prose exist in utter fragility.

Beauty Was the Case They Gave Me by Mark Leidner (Factory Hollow Press, 2011)

How to be poignant through means other than language alone.

More Radiant Signal by Juliana Leslie (Letter Machine Editions, 2010)

“Human beings are never as big/ as the water they carry” (35).

(How to make a philosophical statement larger than its image.)

Bluets by Maggie Nelson (Wave Books, 2009)

How to allow an obsession to lead in a process of healing.

Something Bright, Then Holes by Maggie Nelson (Soft Skull Press, 2007)

“There is a truth that/ I’m going for” (23).

Also, how to play line length against vulnerability.

As Long As Trees Last by Hoa Nguyen (Wave Books, 2012)

An example of how to use the space of the whole page and how to break syntax in favor of image.

Codes Appearing by Michael Palmer (New Directions Books, 1988)

How to grapple with craft without sacrificing poignancy.

Body Clock by Eleni Sikelianos (Coffee House Press, 2008)

How to write a minute.

Crush by Richard Siken (Yale University Press, 2005)

How to write vulnerability –its quiet panic owed to nearly surreal imagery.

Selected Poems by Wallace Stevens (Knopf, 2009)

An impossibly expansive examination of poetry, the poet, image, and fiction.

Curves to the Apple by Rosmarie Waldrop (New Directions Books, 2006)

An example of a philosophy constructed out of an I-you narrative.

Meteoric Flowers by Elizabeth Willis (Wesleyan, 2006)

How to write prose blocks without writing prose. Also, how to admit to verses omitted.

Writing about writing:

Forces of Imagination by Barbara Guest (Kelsey St. Press, 2003)

Bookslut Interview with Maggie Nelson (July 2013)

Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination by Wallace Stevens (Vintage Books, 1951)

Cover art by Shannon Rollins

Veil

Evening drowned in brass
 latch light the way
 ice preserves soundwaves,
in the undergrowth
 funnelcloud particulars
 demand now from then
and by dawn melting beneath,
 I had half-vanished
 almost a dozen times.
Grow and grow
 field of foreign grasses
 auburn sharp and raw.

Early Spring in California,

largely the same as I had left
 it last, the storm wall down on the sand
 different, painted, unsigned,
 a wooden boat in shades of brown
as though it had come up out of wet sand on its own.
 I thought soon it would go
 out into the water alone too,
a remember-when with a person steeped in habit.

As I slept that night a whole Japanese passenger train
 vanished into the sea,
 silt dispersed in burning
 water,
the small boats in Santa Cruz harbor
 tethered and overturned.

Palmed Clouded

Knocked slow, once.
“I am collecting seeds,” I told
him, ankles hollow.
“What are you trying to grow?”

The fairylights strung across his
ceiling pulsed. “They are
breathing lights,” he said.
Decided I had asked too much.

I lay beside him to watch, if the
body forgets intent.
We grow discolored
in the fixed light of language.

Stripped

Here the ridged trees are healthy
left more or less alone. Splendor
is a consequence of distance –
everyone talks to the town-center sycamore,
it sheds its trunk bare
lawn littered chalky.
I swallow mineral water
suppress a cough
so few things happen naturally
alone.
“My first husband is dead, now”
is a quiet ambivalence. Thirty years
implies some degree of memory
loss –
there were moments when in mid-morning
a glance, an intersection
a whispered thing suddenly occurs
to you
corroded and fragrant.

Crowded Now

There isn't much except coincidence.

How I met you, how I have traveled here, remembering
our mothers to each other, the duration and shape of pauses.

The day rubbing its yellow
back on the window, a thing worth watching.

In this I sound pale, like someone belonging
to somewhere else.

That I could be interrupted and warned to stop,
that the air trapped inside
a lung wasn't air at all.

That you could tell by the blush of the skin what had happened now,
today, on days before.

Within Given Limits

You are not gone before you recycle the print, referring
to almost falling half asleep, weary from almost falling.

I think I am here to see something else:
a dyed thing cannot resist what first discolored it.

While you are telling me how few
problems are solved by talking,
all I can smell

is the impatient smell of water,
dripping from the ceiling, rotting wooden panels.

If I have failed to find meaning,
it is because I am waiting
for some form of order

that might reveal itself in
the part of me unbearable to face.

Collecting Seaglass on Bull Island in April

We waded with buckets
and plastic boots. Eighty percent
of the space inside of city limit
is water. Palmed clouded glass.

Maybe I had waited too long –
color fades when it stops
being tended to.

No measurable snow fell this winter
but there is still some melody here.
Your mother watched from
a white painted porch, her house
on a raised foundation.

Moves to Water

Because I cannot see what the environmentalist sees
I cut myself off not only from
the big picture but also its
various details

blind indifference to
objects overall, unless edible

a use of memory
barely sheathed
the inrush
of visible wind dim with silt.

You tip the teacup
toward your tongue finely gritty
but gritty nonetheless.

Pressed Leaves

The trees lean hard against the land where
it has drifted downslope

topsoil emptied
as if by hunger

more extensive than we'd
guessed, and more immediate.

Everyone extends 500 miles in every direction
out of where they are.

I had never seen you sleep before
the way your lips blow when you cough,

there are two kinds of weary:
one bursts, and the other won't fade.

A Generality

All the air above the river
crowded now with the city.

The provability of even one mistruth
would mean that proof itself
had nothing to do with truth at all –

“because it has to include so much
about so much,” you said
and I thought about
how knowing you has changed
the way my skin smells to me.

This is a thing we have to retract,
both you and I agree this is so.

I address you in the second person
only in the privacy of myself

no less real and no
less valid just somewhat
harder
to see.

Your Windowsill

Today my eyelashes are short and this May full up with snow
shaped to the contours
of its situation, well-
adapted much like a watermelon.

Someone once told me I am laden
with snow. This felt
like an apology,
but it's nothing
which is catching.

The roof over your tongue scalded
and spreading slowly –
in New York you discovered that your
eyes are dark as sleep.

James River

I slept less, days and nights fell together,
 pollen collecting in sleeping lungs.
Smile with everything in your face, didn't you know
 that everything is a reflection of the sun?
"Your consciousness is so arbitrary," when I tried to listen.
 The lack of sleep, grey
and only a little yellow, told
 the shape of your upper lip what you're thinking
 nod your head yes
 this is the easiest truth.
Morning held my arm loosely, I might wander away
 overripe with thunderstorm. The river
didn't want to have the first word.

Plumeria

The lake contains two organic red dyes
 a fugitive violet, ephemeral magenta.
You told the best version of what
 you knew at the time.

More or less every breathing thing is at some stage
 small enough to capture.
Given certain undeniabes, you have stopped
 inventing. This is rare, even in science,

not so much incorrect as falling somewhat short,
 an argument paletteized and thick.
Breathing hard, growing too high.

Corroded and Fragrant

Having just learned to see termite damage

I see it everywhere, startling every time.

The biologist captures birds, discoloring their breasts,
measures social implications.

White spots.

Wood foundation hollows.

The birds wear anklets coded
to interference.

I am in stranger water than I wished.

They must be scornful of one another,
because they are picturesque, the way they move.

Improvisation in July

I caught the dew from overnight to keep for you in a jar, still in drops,
constituent parts, not whole, a jar of translucent
marbles, but you swallowed
them with black coffee in the morning. The aloe plant on the porch is wilting,
of all things. The dried flowers above the door,
the sprinkler, the highway.
The gash in the screen door taped shut, but you were bitten by
mosquitos in your sleep last night. You can't imagine how to sleep alone. Don't
go.
A fish always rots from the head down, a tree from the inside out.

Flying at a Constant Angle,

you dreamed I wrote you a poem about resistance.

A generality like

the physical nature of water

or an old thick tree.

Plumeria flowers have no nectar,

most fragrant after sunset

and disorienting

as false light,

so I developed

a written language

to record what I had translated,

not that months really point to anything other
than a method of counting back.

Gulf

Clearly what is lit cannot be hotter
than what lights it,

dry wind forcing breath
to focus your sight
past the rush.

Manatees are or are not more salty
than the water around them.

All cuts eventually scab
telling you, at least, that someone has been here
before,
having quietly died
of exposure.

Stranger Water

She told me to hold my left
wrist with my right hand when I
want to ground a certain moment
in long-term memory –

these moments rated
for the degree to which
they are expository.

Beech blight aphids are
common to this area.
I have trapped one in
the cupboard behind
the bathroom mirror,
during the day it is
several degrees warmer
in there than in the rest of
the room.
I understood this as
the mirror clicked
shut.

August shimmers on such an edge

not the thing itself
nor the other

but the space in between.

Black When Extinguished

If we did not know the interaction between light
and objects, then we would
believe everything is flat
with patches of darkness.
You left the water to boil
for hours
and the pot melted, short sparse flames
on the wooden countertop.
A chance that perception, indiscriminate, is
proportional to the wideness
of your eyes
or their weight overall,
not a body
but a series of lines.

At the next table:
“I am seventy,” she says, laughing.
“She is eighty,” he says, singsong.

RE: Good morning

I'm in Erie right now stealing internet from a Super 8
motel (room 28). If the inclination
to italicize foreign words and phrases exposes
a colonialist attitude, then there is so much
in the world that at first we cannot explain
and then suddenly we can.
I don't know if I will make it the whole way tonight but maybe.

The word for this is not god,
and driving today I had a vision of the china cabinet
infested with possums. I hate being away from you
and there is something extra in driving eastward.

City Tree Fruit

In the middle of last night our neighbor packed up and left,
his books crumpled on the flat stone steps.
By the curb a puckered leather couch, maroon,
hard rain this afternoon.
What lives in a place adopts the light of that place, but
I forgot to consider the altitude,
and the cake collapsed in the center. You, doing battle with your reflex,
smiled as though you were not disappointed.

October

It is the first
day of the month.
This seems
significant, the crystalized
sap, crystalized honey.
I folded yellow aspen
leaves between waxed
brown papers,
boiling milk
on the stove
and turmeric.

"I wore my hair like this today
for you," you said
spatula in hand
the letter F
from the gap in
your teeth.

A Series

I will always have had this blue scarf

the peel of a clementine beneath your hand
shudder of curled yellow
give of wooden stairs

this did not mean anything
but several different shades of light

or how great heat will overwhelm a lesser one
as though it never existed.

The tree outside your window has lost almost all its leaves
some of them have been carved into your windowsill.

The Guestroom

Time is round, and when I came back
November still hadn't ended. Coming around
over and over like the hard
bar of morning, as though
a pencil sketch were enough to know
the quality of light stuck
in the corners of the room,
radiant and airtight.
When exposed this is called erosion,
but I guess I have no recollection of this tree's
progression from green to gold to winterkilled.

Eucalyptus

On the resemblance of sounds to other sounds:

for the moment, almost the same
but twice as real
if heard by two. Played nothing
 of her in it.

The dog understands what it implies to point,

an arm in each sleeve
a thought unacted upon
or so condensed it must have finished
entirely unheard.

Near the End of Sleep

Through windowpane evening I see the elk
felted, graceless.

I hold my breath until the space
of the room sticks in
my pores.

Everything moves to liquid, even glass
and water, more chemically organized,
both obey gravity
downward.

I have drunk so many sounds dissolved in water,
today beneath my ribcage, condensed
frost in the corners of the window.
Of course I know the water in my belly will
outlast me.
I am very still.

The elk has velvet antlers velvet nostrils cavernous
I wonder how it might feel to lay
beside him in the hollow snow
the weight of his hoof, wider than my hands,
on the smallest bones in my face,
and feel this as though it is real.

A Hollow Foundation

and the rest reduced to detail.
The real question is something
other than

how we value
the way snow falls on December
mornings in Colorado.

In another house the kettle whistles,
a man breaks his plate, of all things.
Surely, this means exactly what we think.

An Emphasis on the Season

The confusion of pine wreaths
and peppermint
in the international terminal

of O'Hare

light diffuse, not
even white.

Well, the last time I saw him
he had a beard

perhaps he will wear
scarlet shoes.

A realization that it is winter, witnessed
or not, and it has snowed

a clean urgency

to lend color
without splitting the form.

Snow won't bubble like rain

“it’s a sign of affection your pupils widening like that –
your eyes see something they love”

Beech-tree white, sycamore
white, something sensual about trees
stripped of their grey bark.

Last summer

his peach tree yielded perfect fruit.

A heavy wet March-April snow came in December.

He shook

the snow from the peach tree's branches with a shovel

at midnight and at 5AM and at noon

but when he came home later

it had split clean down the middle like a lightning strike.

In limning you

In icelight Thursday reading translated
poetry, I learn that *whispering* begins with an H in Danish.
I learn that not everyone dreams in color, that dreams begin near the end of sleep.
I look back uneasy at cigarette snow in yesterday morning.
This boy is touching himself as though his body
doesn't fit quite right today, while the earth is growing in every direction
just to hold itself up. Our tilt freezes water in and behind my eyes.
In my dizzy kitchen, ginger root in lonely bowl has grown white-blue mold
on clean flesh, the smell of what was, what is and has been dead.
Fruit is mostly water – I am mostly water,
my gut made up of rotting fruit. I swallow hard against it.
Never has the spinning of the planet been so pleasurable,
expanding on its trajectory, its remote solar loop,
and still I stand in a distant ordinary February, within given limits.

We could not palate them, but wished to.

A fiction of an afternoon
as if reflected in water, the five
thresholds of this block.

Each door painted a different
shade of blue,
collecting toward itself.

Let us sit and reason sweetly
how many ideas folded
into fiction.

Let us hasten to sustain a colony –
this is your mistake. Please
trust me, for I cannot translate that.

Your lip pulled up, apt to repeat.
Sit and think extensively
about this house, the quantity
of steps around the perimeter of each room,
or how it sounds to see through the window.

By Dawn

no one has remembered to

dry the table

gleams and then is gummy

persistent

under pressure

concealment

he will stand and wax eloquent

properties

of his cup

fact of observing

automatically

change the concern

that fear or trauma

written into

a trait inherited

a predisposition

override as if

until spring